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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the investigation reported in this document is to determine the range of errors in the spontaneous speech of Puerto Rican children of intermediate English ability in order to provide specific information on phonetic and morphological deviations from standard English for use in curriculum development. The study first considers common pronunciation problems, many attributed to the influence of Spanish. Problems with vowels, diphthongs, consonants, consonant clusters, stops, and spirants are discussed. Syntactic problems with auxiliaries, tense and number, object complements, negation, structures difficult to understand, and miscellaneous lexical items are also considered. Examples of the errors are provided. (VM)

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Some Errors in English by Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican Children

George Williams*

The dialect of English spoken by Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican elementary school children has not been systematically studied. In fact, virtually nothing is known of the way in which Puerto Rican children acquire English, (e.g., to what extent is it similar to the acquisition of English as a first language, to what extent is it similar to English acquisition by Spanish-speaking adults, etc.), nor the types of errors these children characteristically make after they obtain a relatively good English-speaking ability. Lacking both time and resources to undertake a long-range, full-scale study, we have undertaken a much more moderate task: to determine the range of errors in spontaneous speech made by a few children of intermediate English ability. The purpose of this study is to provide specific information on (primarily) phonetic and morphological deviations from Standard English for use in the curriculum development. The results as well as linguistic and pedagogical comments follow. Information following examples indicates the child's name and tape position.

VOWELS

Learning to speak English from a Spanish-speaking ability results in pronunciations which, from the point of view of Standard English, are non-native or "incorrect", particularly for vowels.

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FL 003 176

Although all of these non-native pronunciations are equally non-native, some are more conspicuous and more frequent than others. On the basis of our tapes, the non-native pronunciations which are jointly most conspicuous and most frequent are the substitution of [a] for [ʌ] and [ae]:

[ap] for [ʌp] (=orth.up) Clito 071.5

[tagi] for [taegi] (=orth. Taggy) Clito 087.5

However, most uses of [a] for schwa ([ə] (unstressed) and [ʌ] (stressed)) were in stressed position. An English schwa in unstressed position was usually pronounced as schwa. Occasionally [ɛ] is also substituted for [ae], for example

[glɛs] for [glaes] (=orth. glass) Clito 288

The conspicuousness and frequency of these non-native pronunciations is no surprise, since /ae/ and /ʌ/ are the English vowel phonemes least like those of Spanish. None of these substitutions of Spanish vowels for English are absolute, despite their moderately high frequency; the vowels in most words, like glass above, appear in normal conversation in both their native and non-native forms. From this we conclude that the speaker is aware of the distinctions between various phonemes, but has not learned which sounds belong with which words. This supports, incidentally, the assumption that a phonological system exists independently of the words which manifest it; it also means that discrimination exercises would be a waste of time for such speakers. Further support for the contention that the distinctions have been learned but have not yet been correctly assigned to lexical items comes from the cases in which an English phoneme with no Spanish equivalent is

substituted incorrectly for an English phoneme with a Spanish equivalent. This occurs because the speaker knows that the Spanish phoneme is often used non-natively as a substitute for the English phoneme without a Spanish equivalent. He frequently overcompensates for his non-native pronunciation, for example:

[fəðər] for [faðər] (=orth. father) Clito 200.5

Further Spanish-influenced pronunciations include the following:

Very short and tense [ɔ]: [frɔk] (=orth. frog) Clito 071

[ū] for, but not to the exclusion of, [U]: [pū] (=orth. put) Harry 065

[ā] for very low [ɔ]: [dāk] for [dɔ̄g] (=orth. dog) Clito 053

[dāk] is also interesting for another reason: for orthographic dog Clito has the pronunciations [dāk], [dɔk], and [daek]. The first pronunciation captures the length and backness of the vowel in the standard English version of the word; the second captures only its roundedness; the third duplicates the vowel as pronounced in Boston. Taken together, the three pronunciations reveal an appreciation of most aspects of standard and non-standard native vowel production.

[Ī] for [I]: [lĪtl] for [lItl] (=orth.little) Clito 079. This, almost the paradigm or caricature case of Spanish accent, occurred almost not at all among the first graders who spoke much English.

Diphthongs were often more rapid than is normally the case in English. Sometimes the long, high vowels of English were not pronounced with an offglide.

[ēbĪcĪ] for [ɛIbiyciy] (=orth. ABC) Clito 163

[mēk] for [mɛIk] (=orth. make) Clito 93

On the other hand, there were instances where an English diphthong was over-diphthongized, i.e., where the second component became a vowel in its own right, rather than just an offglide.

[ə̄ɛĪ] for [ə̄ɛI] (=orth. they) Clito 062

Furthermore, diphthongs were sometimes created. The Spanish

rule for glide-insertion was carried over into English, whereby a strong glide (y) is inserted between two vowels. The glide agrees in height and frontness with the preceding vowel, as is the case in Spanish. A similar example exists for w:

[raIyəstori] (=orth. write a story) Clito 016

[yū haftuwītIt] (=orth. You have to eat it) Harry 004.5

One phenomenon always mentioned in contrastive grammars and studies of interference was not observed at all: no e was inserted before s+Consonant in initial position. Instead of saying [ɛskūl] (=orth. eschool) on the model of [ɛskwela] (=Sp. orth. escuela), all speakers said [skū] or [skūl]. This may be due to the ease of learning to pronounce initial sC clusters, as Jameson concluded in her San Antonio studies; or it may be due to the fact that Puerto Rican Spanish does not always provide [ɛsjwēla] as a model--all of the speakers said [kwēla]. Despite what most studies say, initial sC clusters appear to cause young Puerto Rican pupils little difficulty.

CONSONANTS

The consonantal system of the speakers studied was characterized by frequent Spanish-influenced pronunciations of individual English consonants and by extensive (also Spanish-influenced) word- and syllable-final cluster simplification, including total omission of all final consonants.

Among the Spanish-influenced pronunciations of individual consonants were the following:

Most voiceless consonants were not aspirated in any position. But interestingly, most of the more fluent speakers had begun to aspirate such consonants occasionally. We found an interesting contrast between Clito (fluent) and Toni (not so fluent):

Clito [hī t^hɨ] (=orth. he too; [ɨ]=high back unrounded vowel, also found in Spanish of these speakers) Clito 126

Toni [hī tɨ]

Predictably, initial aspiration of consonants is overgeneralized into final position, where English consonants are usually not released:

[pUdit^{h}] for [pUdIt] (=orth. put it) Clito 105

Very infrequently, a Spanish dental /l/ could be heard in final position:

[dɪgahōl] (=orth. dig a hole) Clito 108

Usually, however, the English velar /l/ was vocalized:

[pərpU] for [pərpəl] (=orth. purple) Clito 272

Occasionally /ð/ and /θ/ were pronounced [d] and [t], respectively.

[dIs] for [ðIs] or [ðɪz] (=orth. this or these) Clito 120

[smIt] for [smIθ] (=orth. Smith) Clito 110

Notice that the substitution of [d] for /ð/ cited here occurred in initial position, where Spanish does not use the voiced interdental fricative that it possesses (except after a word ending in a vowel, as was also the case in Clito 120; although one could quibble about pauses and boundaries), the substitution of stops for fricatives can also be found intervocalically:

[brʌdər] (=orth. brother) Clito 248
[mʌdər] (=orth. mother) Clito 278
[ənadər] (=orth. another) Clito 201

It might be claimed that [ər] should be analyzed as a consonant, or is in fact analyzed as a consonant by the native speakers of Spanish who are being cited. This would explain why all apparently intervocalic substitutions of [d] for /ð/ occur in the environment /V__(?)r/. But the substitution did not always take place; the pronunciation [naðər] for another was also found.

The pronunciation of /r/ was always English, usually even exaggeratedly so. It often had a w-quality to it, as it increasingly does also in the speech of many native speakers of American English.

Sometimes the pronunciation of English and Spanish intervocalic dentals interacted to produce a result best explicable if it is assumed that native- and second-language rules can be applied in various orders during the learning process. In particular, this example suggests that native-language rules

can be applied after second-langauge rules. English frequently converts an intervocalic /t/ into a flap [D]. The Spanish speakers studied also did this; there was little variation. Once, however, [ð] appeared where the flap was expected:

[hɪgaðə] for [hɪzgaDə] (=orth. he's gotta) Clito 283

What presumably happened was that the flap which derived from the intervocalic /t/ was interpreted as a /d/, to which it sounds very similar. This /d/ then underwent the Spanish rule which produces interdental fricatives between vowels.

The initial cluster [hw] was often pronounced [w]:

[aI no wadIs waIt] (=orth. I know what is white = I know what the Spanish word for white is) Clito 267-9

Since many American dialects also do not pronounce the [h], it is difficult to decide whether Spanish or English influence is at work in the above citation. The reduced form of what would probably be pronounced without [h] by a native speaker of English; white would probably not be. White might cause difficulties for a native speaker of Spanish, since in that language [hw] is followed by only a single vowel, the one left over after the u-component of a diphthong becomes a glide.

Richard and Harry, who were approximately intermediate in fluency in comparison with their classmates, substituted [š] for [č]:

[šampyən] for [čaempyən] (=orth. champion) Ricardo; Harry 176.5

[tɪšə] for [tiyčər] (=orth. teacher) Harry 199

The less fluent pupils also affricated [y]:

[ǰɛstIdē] for [yɛstərdɛI] (=orth. yesterday) Harry 132

or inserted [d] in front of it:

[dyīə] for [yIr] (=orth. year) Harry 220

or did the reverse (overcompensation?):

[yē] for [ǰɛI] (=orth. J. J. Hurley) Harry 013.5

Only once did I clearly hear [β] for [v]:

[oβə] for [ovər] (=orth. over) Harry 226

For some less fluent speakers [h] became [x] (voiceless velar fricative):

[xō] for [howl] (=orth. whole) Harry 196

Word- and syllable-final consonant clusters (including "clusters" of one consonant):

A fair number of final consonants and consonant clusters were produced. For example:

[pɛInt] (=orth. paint) Clito 240

[haev] (=orth. have) Clito 304

[ǰʌmp] (=orth. jump) Clito 074

[Iŋgliš] (=orth. English) Clito around 330-350

[pɛIts] (=orth. paints) Clito 251

[ap] (=orth. up) Clito 190.5

[af] (=orth. off) Clito 250

[braðər] (=orth. brother) Clito 235.5

[wan] (=orth. one) Clito 235

[pēntiŋ] (=orth. painting) Clito 220

[bahim̄] (=orth. buy him) Clito 201

[blɛk] (=orth. black) Clito 259.5

[baks] (=orth. box) Clito 148

[kɛt] (=orth. cat) Clito 166

[frɔəg] (=orth. frog) Clito 079.5

[rɛIs] (=orth. race) Clito 027.5

[and] (for [aend] = orth. and) Clito 061.5

[hol] (=orth. hole but with dental [l]) Clito 108

[trʌbəl] (=orth. trouble)
perhaps [dId] (=orth. didn't) Clito 176

[mʌč] (=orth. much) Clito 306

[drIŋk] (=orth. drink) Clito 298

Most consonants and consonant clusters, however--including some of the above--usually undergo some sort of modification in word- or syllable-final position. Occasionally even final consonants which are permitted in Spanish are changed in some way.

STOPS AND SPIRANTS

There is a range of things which happen to word-final obstruents:

1) Voiced obstruents may be devoiced.

2) Stops may be replaced by /h/ or by a glottal stop; Clito does use [h] for [k]; Harry almost never uses the glottal stop for anything. [p] occurred only in up and was never modified.

3) Obstruents may be deleted. Spirants (s, θ, ð, z, f, v) which are part of a lexical item (are not endings) are usually not subject to this process in Clito's speech; in Harry's speech they are. Endings, including [d] and [t], are almost always deleted. Clito also does not delete [k]; Harry does. [p] occurred only in up and was never deleted.

Examples:

1) [froks] for [frɔ̄gz] (=orth. frogs) Clito 060

[rīt] for [riyd] (=orth. read) Clito 070

no example of word with final b

[draIf] for [draIv] (=orth. drive) Clito 210

[yūs] for [yuwz] (=orth. use (VERB)) Clito 016

[pɛIč] for [pɛIǰ] (=orth. page) Clito 173

2) [frɔˀ] for [frɔ̄g] (=orth. frog) Clito 074

[bIh] for [bIg] (=orth. big) Harry 025

[rīˀ] for [riyd] (=orth. read) Clito 182

[raIh] for [raīt] (=orth. write) Clito 143

3) [laI] for [laIk] (=orth like) Harry 024

[raI] for [raIt] (=orth. write) Clito 016

[wI] for [wIθ] (=orth. with) Harry 100

[faI] for [faIv] (=orth. five) Harry 217

[Ī] for [Iz] (=orth. is) Harry 006

-s endings

[ǰʌmp] for [ǰʌmps] (=orth. jumps) Clito 058

The treatment of stops and spirants described and exemplified above is, along with various more random cluster simplifications, perhaps the most pervasive non-native consonantal aspect of the speech of the children studied. I have no idea how--other than by allowing the pupils to speak and hear a lot of English--the English treatment of word- and syllable-final consonants can be taught. It is conceivable that practicing clusters medially and trying to transfer them to word-final position may help. But then, Spanish too allows more medial than word-final clusters, and native speakers of Spanish still have difficulty with this aspect of English.

The pattern described under (1), (2) and (3) above is obviously not unmotivated. The larger the number, the farther away the pronunciation is from one which would be considered native. Stages (1) and (2), then, might be understood as increasingly successful steps in the acquisition of English final consonants: with [h] or a glottal stop some sort of segment is obstructing the flow of air;

a voiceless consonant shows that it has become clear what the position of the lips and tongue must be in order to correctly articulate the segment. Later, presumably, voicing will be learned for final position, since it already appears sporadically. That voicing comes last is also not surprising, since final consonants often tend to voicelessness in the course of linguistic change.

In Harry's speech there are examples which show (2) also applying to certain non-obstruents, namely nasals:

[mɛəh] for [maen] (=orth. man) Harry 178

[wɪ̄h] for [wIn] (=orth. win) Harry 095

In the speech of both Harry and Clito (3) can apply to nasals:

[nē] for [nɛIm] (=orth. name) Harry 164

same for Clito, Clito 403

In addition, in clusters of nasal + consonant, it was almost always the nasal which was deleted if the cluster was simplified:

[ǰap] for [ǰʌmp] (=orth. jump) Clito 072.5

[sʌθɪ̄] for [sʌmθIŋ] (=orth. something) Clito 279

[wəfor] for [wʌn for] (=orth. one for) Clito 145
occurred right after a pronunciation of one with the n.

but: [frɛn] for [frɛnd] (=orth. friend) Clito 169

The behavior of [ŋ] provides an interesting example of, variously, the operation of (3) above, the interference of a Spanish rule, and the complication of a final cluster to satisfy the same Spanish rule:

application of (3):
[fūlɪ̄] for [fuwlIŋ] (=orth. fooling) Harry 051
This might occasionally be accompanied by nasalization:
cf. [sɪ̃] (??) for [sIŋ] (=orth. sing) spoken by Toni; Clito 124

interference of a Spanish rule:
[fInIšIn] for [fInIšIŋ] (=orth. finishing) Clito 169

In Spanish, [ŋ] can occur only before a velar stop, namely k or g. Since no overt velar stop follows [ŋ] in the normal English pronunciation of finishing, Spanish rules would require that the least marked nasal be used, the one employed when no consonant follows: n.

complication of a cluster (of one) to satisfy the just-mentioned Spanish rule:
[brIŋg] for [brIŋ] (=orth. bring) Clito 156-7

[sIŋk] (with additional application of (1)) for [sIŋ] (=orth. sing) spoken by Toni, Clito 127

Here a velar stop has been added so that by a rule of Spanish phonology the perceived English [ŋ] can be generated.

SYNTAX

What the study revealed in terms of syntax can be summed up under the headings, Auxiliaries, Tense and Number, Object Complements, Negation, Structures Difficult to Understand, and Miscellaneous (Lexical Items).

Auxiliaries, Tense and Number

As was mentioned above, almost none of the verb endings ([s, z, t, d]) were pronounced. Suppletive forms were sometimes used, thus showing some morphological distinction between present and past, but usually without distinction between singular and plural:

say for says: he say I gotta lotta book Clito 151

use for used: she use it today Clito 116

dig for digs or dug: he dig a big hole Clito 099

Suppletive forms:

did for *did + not*: his brother did finish it = his brother didn't finish it Clito 177

broke: he broke it Clito 459

were: he were lying Harry 045

but:

throw for *threw*: somebody throw us out Miguel in Harry 229

fight for *fought*: we fight yesterday Harry 132

write for *wrote*: I write a story Clito 026

In general, then, the infinitive form serves in the singular and plural of both the present and the past. Occasionally, in less fluent speech, the infinitive will also replace the progressive:

Miguel go to fight with Georgie Harry 181

As far as the progressive is concerned, the *-ing* form of the verb was correctly used; the progressive auxiliary, *be*, was present once [note, however, that the total number of cases was small, making any conclusions only suggestive].

he fooling Harry 051

his friend is finishing Clito 169

he lying Harry 045

The absence of auxiliary *be* is probably the result of the same process which eliminates many other occurrences of that verb: deletion in contraction environments. As some modest support for this claim (now accepted for native American dialects such as "Black" English) it may be noted that in the two cases I have been able to find in the interviews where contraction is not allowed, deletion

did not occur:

he look like a glass but no IS a glass Clito 286
contraction is out because of emphasis

that where Miss Lyons is Harry 056
contraction is out because null environment to right; note that deletion has occurred after that

The auxiliary have (as opposed to the main verb have) was never used. This fact may mean little, since the only times during the interviews when its use would be required by more or less standard English were in the repeatedly employed construction has got:

his brother got a car Clito 322

he got a book Clito 161

Will, the future auxiliary, could have been used twice, but it was not:

I fight with you...I fight with you now Harry 100

Object Complements

Almost all object complements were used with verbs of saying and knowing; these usually had the structure of sentences used in main rather than subordinate clauses:

he say he bring it to school Clito 156

he say his father buy him a car Clito 197

he say, how that talk Clito 339

I know what's blue Clito 264

I know what is white Clito 269

he say he was, you were cute Harry 104
This sentence is a perfect example of the (initial) failure to make the change in personal pronouns which is necessary when using indirect (subordinate) rather than direct (main clause, quoted) discourse: he and you refer to the same person, and the two sentences which are run together here would be as follows in

written English:

He said "he was cute."

He said that you were cute.

Notice how the he was expresses a permissible indirect discourse sequence of tenses even though the pronoun has not been changed to conform to the rules of indirect discourse.

but: and purple I don't know what it is Clito 272

Other complements were infinitival:

he wanna sit on it Clito 090.5

he de know how to say arithmetic Clito 140

Miss Lyon told him to bring it to school Clito 157

The infinitive marker to is so closely attached to want that the following sentence was used:

you want to me fight with him? Miguel; Harry 091

Negation

The less fluent pupils used Spanish negation exclusively:

he no wanna go Harry 151

now I no have house Miguel; Harry 227.5

Clito, however, used the auxiliary do very frequently when negating sentences. His speech showed a range of transition from Spanish to English syntax:

a) it no cause too much trouble Clito 305

b) he brother di' finish it Clito 176.5

c) he [də] know Clito 140

d) his brother did finish it Clito 175

e) he [didə] eat it Clito 087

f) we [dō] got no more book Clito 182

(a) is purely Spanish in the syntax employed to express negation. The others are English to the extent that the Do Support transformation

is applied, showing an awareness that some auxiliary is necessary in the surface structure of negated English sentences. But nowhere in (b) through (f) is there any sign of the [n] or [t] of the negative element itself (unless it could, on closer analysis, be claimed that there is an [n] in (c) after the [də] and before the [n] of know); only certain traces left by the negative can be seen:

1) the auxiliary itself

2) the vowel used in the auxiliary in (f): [ō] instead of the [ū] found in the unnegated (plural) form of do, which incidentally, is also used in the third person singular by the children interviewed.

3) the schwa in the [didə] of (e), which is probably the remnant of the syllabic n of [dIdn]

In all probability, the forms found in (b) through (f) above result from the deletion of already unstressed, clitic not, assisted perhaps by the general process of final cluster simplification. Sentence (f) also exemplifies the (apparently exceptionless) negative concord found in the speech of those interviewed. Because such concord is found in both Spanish and non-standard English, there is no way of telling what its source is in this case. I would guess, however, that the latter reinforces the former, since in other areas of syntax and phonology contact with standard forms in the classroom has had some effect, and a mixture of standard and Spanish forms results.

Structures Difficult to Understand

During the course of the interviews certain sentences produced answers which indicated that something had been misunderstood.

A list of these sentences and the answers they elicited follows:

a) where's she keep it - no, she give it away Clito 302.5

b) where did you keep it - my father gave it away Clito 309

c) do you have a fish at home (in a conversation about pets) - yo tengo uno bacallo (I have a cod; i.e., he eats codfish at home) Clito 420

d) was there a light in the basement - no, two Clito 318

e) who's (emphatic) got a car - no, his brother Clito 322

f) your brother have a tape recorder, too - no, my father got a big one

g) how long have you lived in Boston - I live over there

no, how long have you lived here - he got five (i.e., years) Harry 209-217

The answers to (a) and (b) make sense if the questions are read "She keep it?" and "You keep it?", respectively. (a) also receives an understandable but unusual answer if that answer is taken to mean "she does not keep it anywhere, since she has already given it away." (b), however, must have been misunderstood; the most likely source for the misunderstanding lies in the normally reduced form of the auxiliary do; if, because of vowel reduction, did was heard as do, (b) received the same sort of answer as (a). Since did can be clearly heard by native speakers of English, (b) may provide some evidence for perceptual difficulty caused by the rules deleting final consonants and consonant clusters in Puerto Rican English.

The answer to (c) may result from neglecting the function of the indefinite article, which would lead to the following reading of the sentence: "Do you have fish at home?"

(d) receives an answer indicating that a has been translated (correctly) to uno; the numerical meaning, rather than the article meaning of the word is then chosen, and in terms of that choice the answer given is a natural. The answer is also possible in native English, but it is most likely to be interpreted as a play on words.

"No, his brother" makes sense as an answer to (e) only if who's is taken to be a name. Nothing in Spanish makes this misunderstanding a natural one.

(f) is a mystery to me.

The answer to (g) may be the result of hearing an adverb of time (how long) plus have you; these items parallel the Spanish question quantos anos tu tienes (how many years have you = how old are you), a question that they as children, and particularly schoolchildren, hear in English all the time. Because it is such a common question, Harry and the others might not have paid much attention to what was actually said after they got a few clues to what was coming. One point is clear from all of this: teachers should not be too quick to assume that their questions have been understood, even when those they are talking with are otherwise reasonably fluent speakers of English.

Miscellaneous

A couple of lexical items were non-natively used due to interference from Spanish:

win: he win (i.e., beat) Mike and I win him Harry 097
vencer means both win and beat

on: he put it in the, on the hole Clito 102
en means both in and on

a: I got a toys (= I have some toys) Toni; Clito 186
a was used for some because the plural of the indefinite article has that meaning in Spanish (and other languages)

a little bit: he got a little bit page (= he has a few pages (left)) Clito 174
There is a Spanish construction with poquito which can mean both "few" and "a little bit"

In addition, he and she were used as possessive adjectives a couple of times:

she name is Maria Clito 386

he name is Victor Clito 388

I do not know whether this is the result of final consonant deletion and analogy ([hIs], [hI]; [hI] sounds like he, and therefore also she, instead of her) or whether it is an attempt to use forms adjectivally tha can be used as prepositional objects in (Spanish) constructions with the same meaning (the name of him, her--but with nominative forms: he, she). Perhaps it was an accident that he and she were used as adjectives.